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ABSTRACT

This author's focus is on identifying and describing the institutional patterns and instructional practices of elementary schools that are instructionally effective, especially for students from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds. The steps for designing such a research project are outlined. A study is described that uses basic skills in reading and math and the differential between the assessed performance of economically disadvantaged and nondisadvantaged students as the criteria for judging effectiveness. Some factors learned from the effective school research that have immediate utility in planning instructional effectiveness are cited. These are that the individual school appears to be the strategic unit for planned change, and all, or nearly all, the members of that school's social system must be involved. In addition, school improvement efforts must start with locally defined problems and a specified statement of intended outcomes. Finally, a procedure for evaluating and monitoring progress must be an integral part of any planned change program. (Author/MLP)

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DOCUMENTING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS: IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

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I am honored to have been invited to participate in this the third annual Summer Instructional Leadership Conference sponsored by the American Association for School Administrators. The conference theme, "Building Success Based Schools" and our particular topic, "Documenting Successful Schools: Is There a Better Way?" represent two areas that have been of special interest to me for a number of years. Though these topics are broad and complex and the time is short, I hope that I will gain much from this dialogue. I always leave discussions with school administrators and fellow researchers with new insights into the complexities of school life and I hope the same will be true for you as well.

My particular approach to documenting successful schools has been influenced by my recent teaching and research experience. For the past six years I have taught a graduate seminar on educational program evaluation at Michigan State University. As part of my preparation for that seminar I have attempted to keep up with the literature and critical issues that surround the evaluation of educational programs. This background has helped me to formulate a perspective on the criteria for judging successful schools and on appropriate methodology that serves as a framework for my research.

In addition, my research interests have centered around studies of instructionally effective schools. I have been privileged to have been a research collaborator with a number of professional colleagues who share that research interest. As a group, the researchers interested in instructionally effective schools seem to share a set of beliefs or assumptions that serve as the foundation for this line

of inquiry. These beliefs are (1) individual schools differ substantially in their effectiveness, (2) instructionally effective schools exist for the full range of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, (3) based on student performance data, we can identify schools that are instructionally effective, (4) the careful description of the instructional practices of instructionally effective schools can and will provide valuable new insights into the teaching and learning process, and (5) the new insights can serve as an important source of information to those interested in school improvement and educational renewal.

My particular focus has been on identifying and describing the institutional patterns and instructional practices of elementary schools that are instructionally effective especially for students from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Criteria for Judging Effective Schools

The first step in the research on instructional effective schools is that of defining what is meant by "instructionally effective." I am sure you have thought a lot about the definition and criteria you would use to judge a successful school. I am equally confident that the criterion you would use would probably be different from mine or other administrators or researchers. As a matter of fact one of the continuing problems that we all face is that the educational establishment, practitioners and researchers, do not agree on the issue of criteria for judging school success. For example, the curriculum director in an urban school system in Michigan was upset when we asked if we could conduct interviews and observations in two of his schools. We had described these schools as instructional effective based on

student performance and he said that neither of these schools were operating programs that he defined as effective. He offered two other schools in which good programs were operating. We declined his offer and were forced to look elsewhere. I do not believe that this example is at all unusual and it serves to highlight the problem we all face with defining the criteria for effective schools.

The absence of any consensus about school effectiveness criteria continues to be a problem for educators and researchers. As a matter of fact, this issue has made it extremely difficult for researchers to build a coherent knowledge base for effective schools and effective instruction. Rather than giving up in defeat it seems that this line of inquiry can and should go forward. Researchers need to be as clear and as explicit as they can regarding the definition and criteria they are using to frame their research. I do not expect that all will agree with the researcher's approach but at least everyone can be clear about the approach being used in any study.

As a minimum, any definition of school success must include a statement that specifies the curricular or content areas in which one will look to judge success and a statement describing the student's for whom we hold these performance expectations. For example, if we say that a successful school is one in which students demonstrate a certain reading proficiency we need to go further and indicate whether this performance standard is to be applied to all students, the average student, middle class students, etc.

An example of a definition of a successful or instructional effective school is the one now being used in the Search for Effective Schools Project being conducted by Ron Edmonds and John Frederiksen through the

Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University. I am pleased to say that I have been a research collaborator with Mr. Edmonds since the project was initiated. Incidently you may be interested in knowing that this project has been supported by private foundations, most notably the Carnegie Foundation, and more recently the National Institute of Education.

In this particular effective schools study the focus is on schools that are instructionally effective for all students, most especially the students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The areas of student performance that represent one element of the criteria for judging effectiveness is basic skills in reading and math. The second element in the criteria is the differential between the assessed performance of economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. A school is defined as instructionally effective if the levels of assessed pupil performance for low socioeconomic status students is at parity with the assessed pupil performance of the non-disadvantaged students in that school and the assessed pupil performance for both groups is at or above the standard of minimum mastery that has been defined as acceptable, in this case by the Michigan Department of Education.

It may be useful to point out certain features of the definition and some of the observations that we have made as we have attempted to apply it as part of our search process.

First, the definition limits the population of possible schools to those Michigan elementary schools that serve at least some disadvantaged and some non-disadvantaged students. In Michigan, this is fairly typical of elementary schools. I hasten to add that the percent of disadvantaged or advantaged students in a single school may be fairly low but usually representatives of both economic groups are present. Second, schools that

evidence parity in pupil performance--advantaged to disadvantaged--is clearly the exception rather than the rule. You know that the more typical pattern is that referred to as the "cummulative deficient"; schools where socioeconomically disadvantaged students fall further and further behind their advantaged counterparts as their performance is examined as a function of years in the school.

It is important to emphasize that this and similar research studies have been successful in identifying schools in which advantaged and disadvantaged students perform at a level of parity in these basic skills areas. The important conclusion that can be drawn from this observation is that if only one or even a few schools can evidence such parity in student performance, parity is clearly possible and presumably more can and should be able to evidence it.

I hope this elaboration of one approach--our current approach--to defining an instructionally effective school has served to reinforce the importance of facing "head on" and "first-off" the criterion problem. You may not agree that basic skills are the only or even the most critical missions of an elementary school and thats okay. Further you may not place the same value as we do on the question of parity in pupil performance across socioeconomic classes and thats okay too. What you should expect from us and other researchers and what we would expect of you is that when talking about successful schools we need to define in observable, measurable terms the intended outcomes on which judgements of success or non-success will be based. I hope we can return to the criterion issue in our discussion but in the interest of time I would like to turn now to the research design or paradigm we use to study our instructionally effective schools.

Instructionally Effective Schools Research Paradigm

For purpose of discussion assume that we have applied the decision rules contained in our definition and we have identified a set of schools that meet our criterion of effectiveness. Our next step would be to select a set of schools that do not meet the effectiveness criterion but are otherwise comparable in terms of the mix of student from various socioeconomic backgrounds etc. Further, assume that we were able to gain access to the schools we have selected for further study. Our next step would be training a field staff to collect the information we are seeking. In the current effective schools project, the field staff are not told in advance which schools have been judged instructionally effective and less effective. This serves to create a "blind" such that the field staff is less likely to be accused of "selective perception". If the field staff knew in advance about the student achievement they may well see some things in the effective schools and not see them in the less effective schools even though they may be equally present. The field staff views their task as describing individual schools much as you would in a case study of an individual school.

It is important to comment on why we include schools that do not meet the effectiveness criterion. The major reason is found in the fact that the goal of this line of inquiry is to identify instructional patterns and instructional practices that are associated with the observed effectiveness levels. The less effective comparison schools serve as a check on the qualities and characteristics that seem to be uniquely associated with the higher or lower levels of pupil performance. We are very mindful of the fact that schools tend to be alike in a lot of ways. However, it's in the study of the uniquenesses found in

instructionally effective schools, when contrasted with the less effective comparison schools, that we hope to identify the critical features of a successful school.

I want to quickly add that this approach, while appropriate, given the state of the art in the effective school research, is not without its problems and potential pitfalls. For example, we recognize that schools are complex institutions with unique problems, resources and normative systems. What this means is that strengths in one school (e.g. an effective principal) may be offset by strengths in another school (e.g. highly motivated teachers). Another potential problem is that resources found in a single school may interact in one way to produce one kind of outcome whereas the same resources may interact to produce a different outcome in a different school.

While we recognize these and other limitations of our research design we believe its strengths coupled with careful controls more than offset these limitations.

If this general approach is to be continued and if we can expect to benefit from the research findings two or three developmental steps need to be taken. First, we should conduct several instructionally effective schools studies and not place too much weight on a single study. If this were to be done those factors identified as critical in one study would be tested in subsequent studies. Presumably several studies, when taken together, would help us to verify those critical factors that transcend time, place and individual study.

Second, as more studies are done we need to increase the level of precision used to assess school and instructional characteristics. For example, the early research on effective schools identified the principal

as a critical factor in the schools success. The next generation of effective schools studies should go beyond this level and begin to ask how principals differ in their behavior as principals. Presumably, effective school principals behave differently than principals in the less effective schools. More precise observations and instruments should help to inform this and other such critical factors.

One final suggestion about future research on instructionally effective schools should be emphasized. When we conduct an effective school study along the lines described we are engaged in what I hope and believe is useful descriptive research. However, we know that descriptive research is useful to a point and we must constantly remind ourselves of the limitaions of descriptive research. One of my public school administrator friends takes delight in reminding me that its one thing to describe a school as it now operates but its quite another to get a school to change in specific ways in the hope that the planned changes will always or usually produce the intended effects. His caution is well taken and I pass it on to you for your reflection. I would remind you that its a big step from description to prescription, we need to build some intermediate bridges. One such bridge would be carefully controlled field studies where we take what we think we have learned from the effective schools research and turn it into a planned intervention program designed to bring about school improvement. Such experimental studies would surely increase confidence we have in what we know to be the critical factors associated with effective schools. Unfortunately, well designed experiemental field studies are extremely complex and expensive. I wish that I could think of a "short cut" between good description and valid prescriptions but I can't. However,

I would like to conclude my presentation by suggesting that, while waiting for the field studies to be completed--and I hope that will--I believe that the effective schools research does have some immediate utility for those of you who are involved in building success based schools and planning school improvement efforts of one sort or another.

Effective Schools Research: Implications for School Improvement

Recognizing that more studies need to be conducted, both descriptive and experimental, I still feel that, if done cautiously, this line of research can be used as one element in a planned school improvement effort.

1. The effective schools research, when coupled with other related research seems to suggest that the individual school appears to be the strategic unit for planned change. Schools represent complex social systems with unique problems and resources and that context is likely to have a profound effect (positive or negative) on any program of improvement.
2. Programs of planned change designed around the individual school unit must seek to involve all or nearly all the members of that school social system in the change process. Our experiences to date suggest that any program of change will likely have an impact on most individuals and the institutional norms that are a part of that school setting. Therefore, all members of the school social system must be involved in the process if we are to have any hope of getting the level of ownership and commitment required to see the change process through to a successful conclusion.

3. School improvement efforts must start with locally defined problems and concerns and must not avoid the criteria problem discussed previously. The processes that can be used to carryout these crucial steps are many and varied. The important point is that some systematic steps designed to yield a locally owned statement of the problem and a specified statement of intended outcomes can not be ignored and must occur early in the planning process.
4. The effective schools research suggests that a procedure for evaluating and monitoring progress must be an integral part of any planned change program. Our experience suggests that such a process is welcomed because it provides feedback on problems that need further attention and it serves as a source of reinforcement for success which are identified by the process.
5. I would suggest that school districts could benefit from conducting their own version of an effective school research study. Such an evaluation study could serve as a discussion item for administrators and teachers. I know of several school systems that have conducted such self studies and they seem to have made good use of these descriptions because they focus discussion and reflection on local schools on local efforts at building school success.

Summary

The effective school research though limited and usually descriptive has begun to identify a set of research methodologies and a preliminary set of findings which are useful in suggesting promising directions for school improvement. This line of inquiry can be helpful in stimulating

the kind of thinking that local leaders need to plan and implement school improvement programs in individual buildings.

The effective school research strategy needs to be used in many more settings by many more researchers before we can have full confidence in the findings. Nonetheless, this line of inquiry has demonstrated that there are instructionally effective schools and it seems plausible that we can benefit from a careful study of many such schools.

I have described one way of documenting successful schools. We now turn to the question "Is there a Better Way?" I'm sure the answer to this question is "yes" if we can assume unlimited resources for such documentation. I would suggest that the process that I have described represents one way of documenting schools that seems sensible and hopefully useful in adding to our knowledge base about successful schools. I would hope that school administrators would review this research as they set about to plan school improvement efforts.